BODY AND MASK IN ARISTOPHANIC PERFORMANCE

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Introduction

In Greek theatre the mask worn by the actors was a full-headed piece, and the concealment of the performer's face and head was complete disallowing a double vision between actor and character. In the performance of tragedy the actor's body remained unchanged and it was through text, dress, and mask that one could recognize the mythical status of the characters. In Greek comedy, however, it appears that the masking of the head and dressing of the body was inadequate to effect a full transformation of the actor into a comic character. Through a close examination of visual evidence scholars have agreed that in Aristophanes' theatre the actors were also required to mask their bodies with a padded rump and belly and, in the case of male characters, a large dangling phallus. Thus, the body mask became as important as the head mask in its power to transform the actor into a different persona, suggesting that the comic characters' bodies were as significant as their heads in producing meaning and not a simple costume accessory. In this case, the similarity between the distorted bodies with their oversized bellies and buttocks and presence of visible large phallus must have been semantically crucial in the audience's appreciation of the Aristophanic characters.

In this paper, I shall argue that when analyzing the grotesque mask as part of a wider distortion that has taken place on the performer's body, the differences between different faces become less important, making the unifying aspect of the Aristophanic costume more apparent and the malleability of the comic mask's facial features more probable for an ancient audience. Although Aristophanic theatre may include change of identities and parody of important fifth-century personalities the underlying essence of the different characters remains the same and would have been communicated through their distorted heads and exaggerated bodies as well as their distinctive physical behaviour onstage.

In his insightful study *Aristophanes and the definition of comedy* Michael Silk has convincingly argued that most of the Aristophanic heroes are non-realistic and that they belong to an alternative mode of representation which he calls 'recreative', and whose distinctive and essential feature is linguistic and non-linguistic discontinuity.[1] In Silk's view, the introduction of the term 'recreative' when describing the Aristophanic personnel is doubly appropriate because it suggests that the dramatic characters have (or have been given) the ability to recreate themselves anew whilst enjoying some relationship with

[1] See chapter 5, 'Character and Characterisation', in *Aristophanes and the definition of comedy* (Oxford 2000) 207-55.

reality which is less direct than the mimetic relationship implied by the realist tradition.[2] He brings forth as an example Aristophanes' mobility of style which makes for inconsistencies within a given speaker's range of idiom or behaviour, making the way in which characters act and express themselves generally incompatible with any kind of realism.[3] In the same way non-linguistic behaviour such as frequent transformations and reversals could not be described as 'incidental moments in otherwise tidy and consistent plays'. They are themselves the essence of Aristophanic drama and for this reason constitute the most significant part of the characters' presentation within the playful atmosphere of Aristophanic comedy.

Although Silk's book has rightly placed Aristophanes' work in a central position in the development of dramatic literature, his study does not consider the comic characters' impact in performance. David Wiles sees this as symptomatic of a wider tendency within the academic community to avoid dialogue between disciplines such as classical literature, archaeology, and theatre studies.[4] There has been, however, in the past few decades an increasing interest in understanding ancient drama in terms of its meaning in performance. Martin Revermann's recent study on Aristophanic comedy, *Comic business: theatricality, dramatic technique, and performance contexts of Aristophanic comedy*, is a prime example of this.[5] Without neglecting the textual aspects of more traditional readings Revermann's analysis of Aristophanic performance draws on methodologies and conceptualizations of Theatre Studies. Ancient iconography that depicts dramatic scenes, although limited, has also proved a valuable source of information in supporting performance-based interpretations. The most significant research on comedy has been carried out by Oliver Taplin with his seminal book *Comic angels,* Richard Green, and Helene Foley who based on a careful scrutiny of the archaeological evidence attempt to link the comic figures to questions of theatrical meaning.[6] Wiles with his valuable research on the Greek mask has also made a substantive attempt to understand Greek theatre from a theatrical perspective.[7]

Building upon such critical studies, this article aims to focus on the grotesque images depicted by the archaeological evidence and go beyond the text by taking Silk's argument

[2] This is most obvious in plays such as *Acharnians*, *Lysistrata*, and *Peace*.

[3] E.g. the stylistic quality of the speakers' words switches frequently and often drastically for no rational reason.

[4] David Wiles, 'The poetics of the mask in Old Comedy', in Martin Revermann and Peter Wilson (eds.), *Performance, iconography, reception* (Oxford 2008) 374-92, at 379.

[5] Martin Revermann, *Comic business: theatricality, dramatic technique, and performance contexts of Aristophanic comedy* (Oxford 2007).

[6] Oliver Taplin, *Comic angels* (Oxford 1993); Helene Foley, 'The comic body in Greek art and drama', in Beth Cohen (ed.), *Not the classical ideal: Athens and the construction of the other in Greek art* (Leiden 2000) 275-311; Richard Green, 'Towards a reconstruction of performance style', in Pat Easterling and Edith Hall (eds.), *Greek and Roman actors: aspects of an ancient profession* (Cambridge 2002) 96-105.

[7] *The masks of Menander: sign and meaning in Greek and Roman performance* (Cambridge 1991), *Mask and performance in Greek tragedy* (Cambridge 2007), 'The poetics of the mask in Old Comedy' (n. 4, above).

further, proposing that the distorted bodies associated with the genre of Old Comedy also contain a 'recreative' quality whilst visually highlighting the comic character's intense gusto for living. Based on my observations regarding the appearance of comic stage figures, I shall attempt to show that the Aristophanic mask would not have been perceived by the audience as stable through a detailed set of fixed features but changeable in accordance with the wider performance context, giving the spectators the freedom to 're-create' the characters anew.

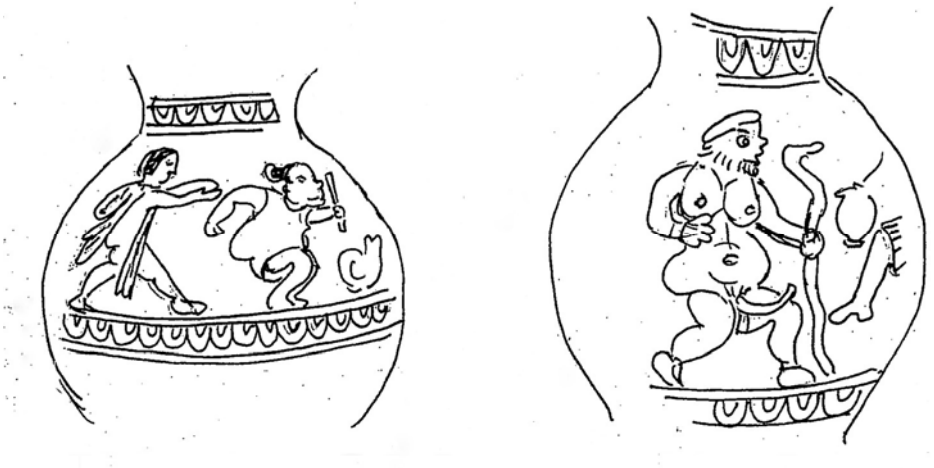
Before reaching any conclusions, however, it is essential to look at some visual representations of what many scholars have agreed to be depictions of stage figures in order to appreciate the physical appearance of comic actors and their masks. Because there is a lack of visual information about comedy during the most of the fifth century, my investigation into the appearance of comic masks will cover the period of Old and Middle Comedy from the end of the fifth century up to the middle of the fourth century. Starting with consideration of some Attic vase paintings and the New York terracotta figurines I shall conclude my investigation by looking at a number of South Italian vase paintings (400 BC onward) that could be directly connected to Aristophanic scenes.

Attic vase paintings and the New York teracotta figurines

As we can see from the Attic images (see fig. 1.1-1.14) all the masks share some common characteristics, first and most important the fact of distorting the face. The face is no longer beautiful but ugly. Aristotle characterizes the comic mask as *aischron*, which in ancient Greek means ugly in appearance and obscene in meaning, 'τό γελοῖον πρόσωπον αἰσχρόν τι καὶ διεστραμμένον ἄνευ ὀδύνης' (*Poetics* 5.1, 'the comic mask is ugly and distorted, but does not imply pain'). Pollux tells us that Old Comedy masks were designed to increase what is funny 'ἐπὶ τὸ γελοιότερον ἐσχημάτιστο' (4.143), which suggests that the representations of the stage characters were full of humorous exaggerations and distortions. As part of this distortion the mouth is wide. This is clearer in the terracotta figurines and the masks on the marble relief (fig. 1.5-1.14). On some vases the face is not clear but the sense of distortion is still present by observing the shape of the head (fig. 1.3) It is important to remember that the mask was not only a cover of the face but of the whole head. Thus it transformed the whole shape of the head and not only the facial characteristics.[8] In figure 1.2 despite the distortion of the head's shape the comic mask does not seem out of proportion compared with the rest of the body. One of the main reasons for it seeming in balance with the rest of the body is that it does not seem to strike us as different. The mask is distorted but not enlarged and placed upon an equally distorted body. It seems that the whole image is masked and that the distortion of the face has expanded to the body with its padding. The entire image is ugly and the head suits the body. If the mask were positioned on a non-padded body it would strike us as misplaced and conversely if an actor were not wearing the mask the representation would seem

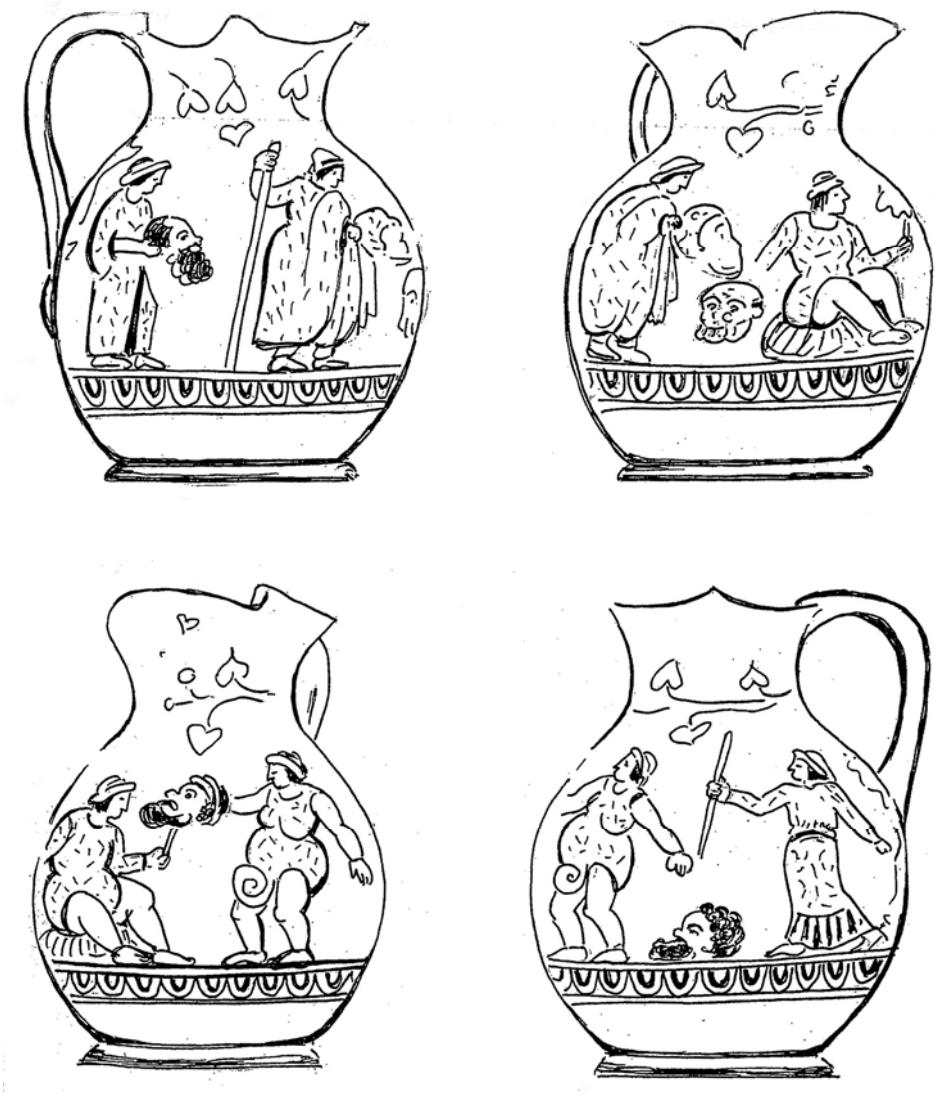
[8] See Alan H. Sommerstein, *Aeschylean tragedy* (Bari 1996) 41.

1.1 ‘Heracles, Nike, and Comic Dancer’. Attic Chous, Louvre, 410 BC, Paris N 3408. Drawing by Athena Varakis



1.2 (left) ‘Chous’. Attic Chous, Louvre, 420-410 BC, Paris CA2938. Drawing by Athena Varakis

1.3 (right) ‘Chous’. Attic Chous, National Museum, 400 BC, Athens 17752. Drawing by Athena Varakis



1.4 'Chous'. Attic Chous, Hermitage Museum, late 5th century, Leningrad. Drawing by Athena Varakis

incomplete (fig.1.4). The head appears to be part of the grotesque whole and not an isolated part carrying its own meaning.

The distortion of the comic body becomes clearer for the observer of visual evidence if compared with the static and ordered body of tragedy and the later body of Menandrian comedy. The tragic and Hellenistic stage figures provide the observer with a model of theatrical bodily display from which the Old Comedy figures differ or deviate, allowing us to make some interesting observations. It also demonstrates the classical audience's familiarity with the non-hyperbolic form of tragedy and thus their ability visually to appreciate the distorted bodies of comedy by means of comparison.

Winkler in his important article 'Phallos politikos' followed a synchronic approach in his interpretation of theatrical costume by stressing the contrast between the comic and tragic body in political terms. In his view, comedy in antithesis to tragedy developed an inclination towards anticivic behaviour which was visually echoed through the presence of antiathletic bodies.[9] The distorted appearance was, thus, interpreted as directly relevant to the citizen status of the character.

Richard Green, similarly to Winkler, appears to suggest that ugly appearance somehow excused the comic characters' non-acceptable public behaviour. In comparing them with the tragic figures Green observes

> The contrast with the propriety of tragic costume is surely deliberate. Comic performers are placed outside the normally acceptable appearance of the citizen as we see it in art, or as we read it in texts. They are gross, uncouth, as is made clear by their fat appearance or even more especially by the large and obvious phallus which contrasts with the preternaturally small ones of males in fifth and fourth century art. The comic performer stands outside the accepted norm and this is doubtless part of the convention which allows the characters of comedy to behave in ways and to say things which also fall outside the accepted norms of public behaviour.[10]

In her recent study on the Sophoclean chorus M. R. Kitzinger rightly argues that Athenian citizens were able to adopt different perspectives due to their regular participation in rituals and for this reason were able to assume a different state of being and behaving when performing the chorus.[11] In the same way, I would argue that the behaviour of Aristophanic people was not necessarily anticivic but similar to what would be witnessed and experienced in religious festivals, taking into account that part of an Athenian citizen's duty would be his regular participation in explicit public celebrations of an obscene nature permitted in many Athenian festivals, notably the Lenaea, where comedies were staged as part of the proceedings.

That said, it is still undeniable that when comparing the comic bodies with the tragic stage figures their contrasting qualities become obvious. The bodies of tragedy appear

[9] J. J. Winkler, 'Phallos politikos: representing the body politic in Athens', *Differences* 2 (1990) 29-45.

[10] Green, 'Towards a reconstruction of performance style' (n. 6, above) 104.

[11] Margaret R. Kitzinger, *The choruses of Sophocles' Antigone and Philoctetes* (Leiden 2008).

1.5 (left) Marble Relief from Lyme Park. Attic Marble relief, 380-350BC., Stockport. Drawing by Athena Varakis

1.6 (right) 'Heracles'. Attic Terracotta, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 370-360BC., New York 13.225.27. Drawing by Athena Varakis

1.7 (left) 'Man'. Attic Terracotta, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 370-360BC., New York 13.225.13. Drawing by Athena Varakis

1.8 (right) 'Man Carrying Basket'. Attic Terracotta, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 370-360 BC., New York 13.225.22. Drawing by Athena Varakis

1.9 (top left) ‘Water-Carrier’. Attic Terracotta, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 370-360 BC, New York 13.225.14. Drawing by Athena Varakis

1.10 (top right) ‘Seated slave’. Attic Terracotta, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 370-360BC, New York 13.225.20. Drawing by Athena Varakis

1.11 (bottom) ‘Old woman’. Attic Terracotta, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 370-360 BC, New York 13.225.25. Drawing by Athena Varakis

1.12 (left) 'Man with Legs Crossed'. Attic Terracotta, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 370-360BC, New York 13.225.28. Drawing by Athena Varakis

1. 13 (centre) 'Seated Man'. Attic Terracotta, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 370-360BC, New York 13.225.16. Drawing by Athena Varakis

1.14 (right) 'Seated Man'. Attic Terracotta, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 370-360 BC, New York 13.225.19. Drawing by Athena Varakis

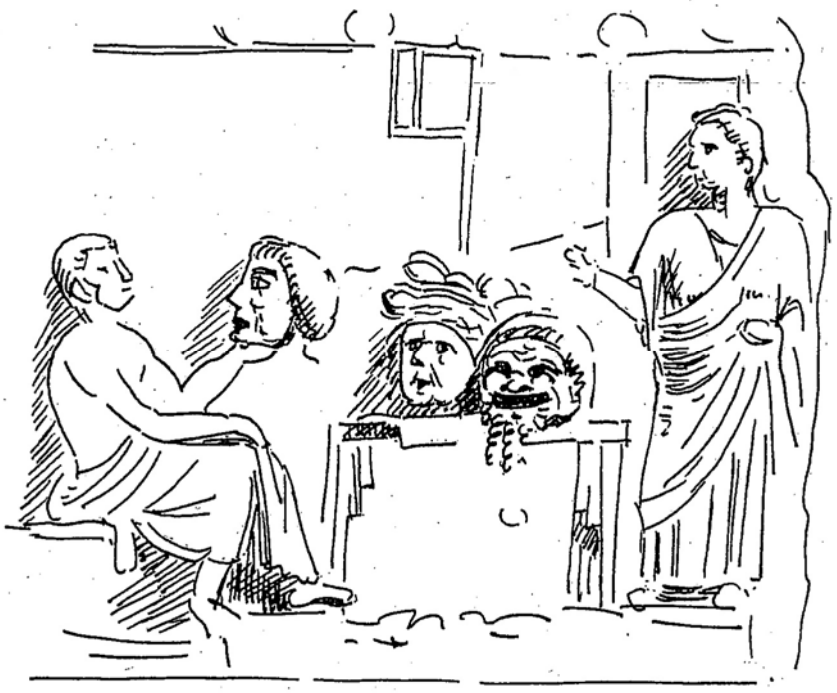
more static, ordered, and enclosed in their long robes. Wiles suggests that the wearing of the *himation* as in everyday life must have 'imposed a bodily discipline involving stillness, balance and restricted gesture'[12] maximizing their potential for speech. This sense of bodily order suits the ordered world of tragedy whilst the enclosure of the body within long robes visually reinforces the sense of entrapment which describes the condition of many tragic heroes and heroines.[13]

When observing the later Hellenistic mask one can, once again, appreciate the different qualities between the Old and New Comedy masks (fig. 1.15, 1.16). The latter are larger, the mouth and eyes wider, while the body loses its padding (distortion) and becomes more decent.[14] The mask is therefore the element that strikes us the most when seeing the artistic representation of the comic performer. The whole image encourages the spectator to look at the face. This is the most important feature, not the body. It helps the spectator understand and distinguish character. The classical comic mask on the other hand is not much bigger than the actor's head and does not strike us so sharply when observing the whole figure of the actor. Even if viewed in profile the stage figure offers an interesting sight. The body is as expressive and significant as the head as there is no neck to isolate the two. It is not static and monotonous.

[12] David Wiles, *Greek theatre performance: an introduction* (Cambridge 2000) 159.

[13] Characteristic examples of such tragic heroes/heroines are the characters in the *Oresteia* and Sophocles' heroine Electra.

[14] Indecency and distortion of body are associated with lower status in New Comedy. For more on this matter see Wiles, *The masks of Menander* (n. 7, above).



1.15 ‘Menander Relief’. Marble Relief, Lateran Museum, Rome 487. Drawing by Athena Varakis

1.16‘Relief in Naples’. Marble relief, Naples 6687. Drawing by Athena Varakis

Following these observations and comparisons it makes sense to observe the head as part of a masked whole. Both body and head are 'masked' and deeply connected since there is no neck to isolate the two, just as happens in an animal disguise where the observer does not think in terms of differentiating faces. The result of observing in this manner leads one to the likelihood that there were few theatrically significant differences between different faces, and if some exist they would not be easily identifiable. All characters are ugly with distorted characteristics. The variations of the faces do not seem significant if you observe the image as a whole, especially if you observe them as part of a scene performed in an orchestral space within a large ancient amphitheatre. The bodies are very similar, which makes the differences of the face seem less significant. This description appears to suit the quality of the Aristophanic characters. The Aristophanic hero, for example, has a distorted body (belly, over-sized genitals) no matter his social status or age. The beautiful body of an ideal city[15] does not exist in Aristophanic comedy with the exception of the Demos in the play *Knights*, which as Wiles correctly points out proves the rule by being the exception.[16] It is well known that Athenians believed that a healthy body is necessary for a healthy mind. In the Aristophanic world, however, the bodies are disordered exactly like their world. In many comedies the phallus becomes the central organizing force of the city. In *Lysistrata,* for instance, war becomes a question of how much sex one is having, and decisions on peace are determined by the phallus' needs. In this typical fifth-century Athenian comedy life is organized around the lower regions of the body, which are visually emphasized through costume.

The above descriptions and their subsequent association with the Aristophanic characters derive from the observation of the full image of the comic character. Thus, when the mask is observed in isolation (as an artefact) one necessarily pays attention to the face and its details (see fig. 1.3). The more elements depicted in a painting of such interaction of bodies and props, the less important the face becomes.

Book Four of Pollux' *Onomastikon* (2nd century AD) contains a catalogue of stereotype masks of New Comedy. T. B. L. Webster, influenced by Pollux' New Comedy catalogue, tried to find differences between masks and by doing this to fit Aristophanic characters into categories based on the mask, ignoring the similarity between the bodies.[17] In order to classify the comic masks depicted on comedy-related pottery he intentionally isolated the head from the rest of the body and focused on the face.[18] By doing this he observed some variations in hairstyles, size of beards, and facial characteristics such as nose and eyebrows, and classified the masks in a catalogue. The intention of his research clearly disregarded the theatrical function of the mask within a performance context and for this

[15] The description of the ideal city in Plato's *Republic* 412a-14b.

[16] From unpublished seminar paper presented at the Institute of Classical Studies on the 'Poetics of mask in Old Comedy'.

[17] T. B. L. Webster's catalogue *MOMC*^{3} (London 1978). The first catalogue was published in 1960 one year before his catalogue illustrating images from New Comedy.

[18] He found a number of similarities between masks on different vases and based on those created 26 mask types in order to cast Aristophanes' plays without duplication. Basic categories are men, who come before female and are divided into old, young, poor, and slaves, beardless; and women, who are divided in middle aged and young.

reason it is very difficult to endorse this classification when considering the mask's impact in the theatre. In a later edition of this catalogue (revised by J. R. Green) some of Green's drawings were included and the categories were changed, which made the classification process clearer, however Green acknowledges that in some cases the evidence is not enough to consider the mask as representative of a type.[19] This prioritization of the face as a tool which helps us recognize types is assumed to derive from the principle that a stock of masks pre-existed the play and could be used in more than one comedy, such as happened in New Comedy, and this is exactly how Webster proceeded when he tried to find (through visual evidence) enough masks to cast all of Aristophanes' plays. Even if his results are correct it is difficult to imagine that the theatre of Aristophanes would be restricted to a fixed amount of types considering the amount of transformations and reversals included in the plays, where the crossing of boundaries from the human to a fantasy world was an essential aspect of the play.

Another argument for prioritizing the face in Aristophanic theatre would be based on the theory that some personalities of Aristophanes' time were portrayed in his plays. These personalities seem to have been identified during the production through the use of portrait masks.[20] Silk describes these masks as 'distinctive' in representation of particular individuals as opposed to the 'generic' masks that represent old and young men, slaves, etc.[21] In this case, highlighting the details of the face to recognize character becomes essential. Even though the face is important in order to recognize the character, the existence of such masks contradicts the theory of Webster. Each personality would have needed its own mask and could not be represented by a mask-type.[22] Unfortunately there is no visual information to support the existence of portrait masks and thus the safest way of dealing with this matter for the purpose of this study is to imagine how a portrait mask would be visible to a large audience seated in an ancient amphitheatre. If a portrait-mask were the same size as the other comic masks, then details would not be visible to the audience on the top seats, so a detailed replica of the face would have been meaningless. Even if the mask were intentionally made bigger its detailed facial characteristics would not always be visible to the whole of the audience. It is very difficult for frontal acting to function in an orchestral space and thus face to face communication would be very difficult to deliver for the entire audience. The only way a detailed replica of the face would work for the audience would be if it had already been displayed before the

[19] *MOMC*[3] 13.

[20] For more on this issue see K. J. Dover's special study, 'Portrait–masks in Aristophanes', in R. E. H. Westerdop (ed.), *ΚΩΜΩΙΔΟΤΡΑΓΗΜΑΤΑ: Studia Aristophanea viri Aristophanei W. J. W Koster in honorem* (Amsterdam 1967) 16-28.

[21] *Aristophanes and the definition of comedy* (n. 1, above) 8.

[22] 'Against this assumption of a common stock may be set the traditions that various dramatists invented new masks, the supposition that the masks of Old Comedy were portrait masks…This, however, only amounts to saying that the stock was not a fixed stock but a stock which changed with the times'. See T. B. L. Webster, 'The poet and the mask', in M. J. Anderson (ed.), *Classical drama and its influence: essays presented to H. D. F. Kitto* (London 1965) 10.

performance during the procession or *proagon*,[23] and the spectator had the opportunity to observe it. In this case the recollection of the image during the performance would make the existence of such masks semantically more meaningful.

Dover, who has made a study of portrait masks, adopts a moderate view regarding the existence of these masks. He believes that mask-makers would have made portrait masks when it was technically possible. These masks would not have been a replica of the face but a mask on which certain features of the man being lampooned would have been exaggerated. The difficulties, however, would still be present because those features easily identifiable from a distance (beards, colour, and shape of hair) existed on most men. He believes for instance that Nicias and Demosthenes had nothing remarkable to caricature. On the other hand Socrates' face was too similar to that of a comic mask, so he would not strike one as different.[24]

Although portrait masks may have exaggerated a distinguishing feature of the personality's head we must not underestimate the audience's imaginative power to recreate in their minds well-known personalities supported by other distinctive features relevant to the person's physicality or voice. Unfortunately there is no visual evidence to support the existence of these masks and one can only speculate about their appearance and function in performance practice.

I shall conclude this section by looking at the New York terracotta figurines. Dating from the late-fifth and fourth centuries it is assumed that these series of miniatures of comic actors were often employed as grave goods. If we accept that some of these figurines are representations of comic actors,[25] it would help us understand better the masks' relation to the body. In some of these figurines (see fig. 1.6, 1.7 and 1.12) one can observe that the head, wide mouth, belly, and genitals are the parts that strike us the most. Therefore the head visually seems no more or less significant than these bodily parts. This brings to mind Bakhtin's description of the grotesque body in his *Rabelais and his world.* Both Foley and Wiles in their discussion of Aristophanic costume have noted the similarity between Bakhtin's theorization of the grotesque body and the Aristophanic mask.[26] Foley attempts to connect these bodies to particular comedies in her attempt to see how the body may complement particular Aristophanic behaviours, whilst Wiles is more interested in the democratic principle of equality that lies at the heart of Bakhtin's understanding of the grotesque mask and recommends his work as a useful starting point when considering the way in which the mask may function both as a ritual object and political tool.

Bakhtin points us towards a semiotics of the mask, whereby the jutting beard, bulging eyes, and gaping mouth belong with the bulging stomach and folds of skin to create a

[23] The pre-contest took place on the first day of the City Dionysia festival and was the time when the poets appeared with their casts out of costume to describe their plays in front of their audience.

[24] See Laura Stone, *Costume in Aristophanic comedy* (Salem, NH 1980) 35-36.

[25] A. W. Pickard-Cambridge correctly observes that the terracotta figurines require careful handling since one cannot be sure that they are directly connected to comic theatre. See *Dramatic festivals of Athens* (2nd. ed., Oxford 1968) 214.

[26] Foley, 'The comic body in Greek art and drama' (n. 6, above) and Wiles, 'Poetics of the mask in Old Comedy' (n. 4, above) 389.

body that is not hermetically sealed into its own individuality, but opened to a regenerative organic world that incorporates common humanity[27] The grotesque mask and body, instead of dividing people through its unique distinctive appearance, created the exact opposite effect, which was to level all wearers. It is undeniable that Bakhtin's interpretation of the grotesque and his description of the grotesque body in *Rabelais and his world* appear very similar to the grotesque quality of the teraccotta figures with their characteristic padded bodies. The grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose.[28]

The body is presented as a phenomenon in transition and is not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries. Bakhtin's discussion of terracotta figurines representing old pregnant hags manifests a grotesque conception of the body by embodying the poles of the biocosmic cycle:

> There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine a senile, decaying, and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed.[29]

Unlike studies of the grotesque, which conceive the grotesque as an alien and frightening form that invokes an estranged world with daemonic powers, Bakhtin's *Rabelais* knows nothing of terror.[30] On the contrary the grotesque form is connected to a joyous, fertile, and perfectly egalitarian world just like it is in Aristophanic comedy.

According to Bakhtin Rabelais was inspired by the festive democratic popular culture of the middle ages, a culture built around festivals whose roots extended back to the Roman Saturnalia and beyond. By embracing the metaphor of cosmos as body, the notion of individual death was no longer frightening but an organic element in communal regeneration. This led to a festive perception of the world which was whole, material, unified and universal.

At this point it makes sense to suggest that Aristophanes and Aristophanic comedy were also influenced by the democratic culture of the classical era, which was also built around festivals. The phallic emblem and the drinking of wine were central in these festivals, which included processions, dances, theatre, and dance competitions. The major dramatic festival, the City Dionysia, was held in spring and was a product of the democratic world of Athens. In this festival a ritual procession preceded the dramatic competitions. It was during this procession that the population of Athens took an active part in the festival, parading down the streets following a specific route whilst carrying skins of wine and being under disguise. The street procession reached its climax with the

[27] 'Poetics of the mask in Old Comedy' (n. 4, above) 389.

[28] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world* (Bloomington 1984) 26.

[29] Ibid. 25-26.

[30] Such as Wolfgang Kayser's study, *The grotesque in art and literature* (Toronto-New York 1966).

dithyrambic competitions between the tribes, followed by bull sacrifices. In the evening the participants ate meat from the bull that was sacrificed in honour of Dionysus and drank wine, a gift from Dionysus. At this point all citizens became equal under the ruling of Dionysus' emblems. Two points need mentioning here. First that most of the audience were not passive spectators, as they were also performers with experience in dancing and singing; and second, the comedies were not only influenced by the spirit and customs of festivals but were also part of a festival. In Aristophanic comedy the phallus and wine-drinking are essential elements of the performance, which itself is dedicated to Dionysus. Most comedies are customarily sealed with a celebration (*Acharnians, Peace*) that involves wine, food, and sex, echoing the spirit of the wider festival celebration. The mask was also associated with the spirit of the ritual festival and was an element present during the first-day procession bringing the participants closer to the Dionysiac world.[31] The power of the Dionysiac mask, similarly to that of the comic mask, appears to lie in its ability to break down categories of difference, a feature which is relevant to the god's transformative nature.[32] The power and collectivity of Dionysiac possession is particularly appropriate to the genre of Aristophanic comedy with its frequent reversals and transformations where the notion of a fixed identity is no longer present. Take the comedy *Frogs,* for example, where the issue of identity becomes a matter of confusion. On the level of plot, Dionysus' exchange of costumes with his slave Xanthias, which starts with the plea, "you become me" (495), is the consequence of his disguise as Heracles, who is unwelcome to Hades. When the gatekeeper of Hades, Aeacus, emerges Xanthias is dressed as Heracles, and in order to prove that he has never been to Hades before he suggests that Dionysus as a slave should testify under torture. Dionysus then requests that torture be applied to both in order to prove that he is the god and thus insensitive to pain. The test fails to distinguish man from god reiterating the fact that status distinctions were of no importance in Aristophanes' world where the characters at any given moment could assume different identities.

South Italian vases and the comic mask

The South Italian vases are extremely valuable since they could be directly relevant and not only influenced by Attic comedy.[33] They are not only comedy-related paintings but also appear to be scene-specific, almost like a snapshot from the actual performance. Indeed, Taplin has argued that South Italian vases may represent scenes from Attic comedy as experienced by the artists who had witnessed local performances of Aristophanic comedy, making them the closest one can get to the original production.

[31] Plutarch, *On the Love of Wealth* 527d.

[32] For a comprehensive analysis of how theatrical masking relates to the god Dionysus, see Wiles, 'Mask of Dionysos', in *Mask and performance in Greek tragedy* (n. 7, above) 205-36.

[33] Most scholars (Webster, Pickard-Cambridge) used to believe that these vases represent scenes from *phlyakes* (a type of Greek farce which portrayed scenes from everyday life; a famous type of *phlyax* was known as *hilarotragodia*, a burlesque of mythology) but accept their Attic influence. Taplin believes that they represent scenes from Attic comedy and have no connection with *phlyakes*. For more see 'Phlyakes' in Taplin, *Comic angels* (n. 6, above) 48-54.

As Taplin has correctly observed there are a number of features on these paintings (fig. 1.17-1.21) which are common.[34] Apart from the comic mask, all male characters have padded bodies around belly, bottom, and often breasts. They wear rumpled tights and if not wearing a short *chiton*, which reveals the phallus, they wear a body stocking, which represents stage-nakedness. The phallus is big and strikes the spectator when observing the image. The comic phallus is almost as much a defining characteristic as the mask, and its absence or concealment would need a special explanation. The phallus is never erect and its erection would again call for a special explanation. The female characters on the other hand share the same ugly mask, but their bodies are more decent. Since these paintings are connected with performance the features common on the paintings must have been significant in the realm of theatre as well. It is obvious that visually the body seems as significant as the head. As we observed when examining some of the Attic paintings and terracottas the mask appears to be part of a masked whole. In these scenes it does not make sense to isolate the face from the body in order to examine it because the body is deeply connected to the head, reflecting through its visual appearance the Aristophanic play's body politics, which stresses the human desire to eat and drink but also to satisfy sexual and excretory urges.

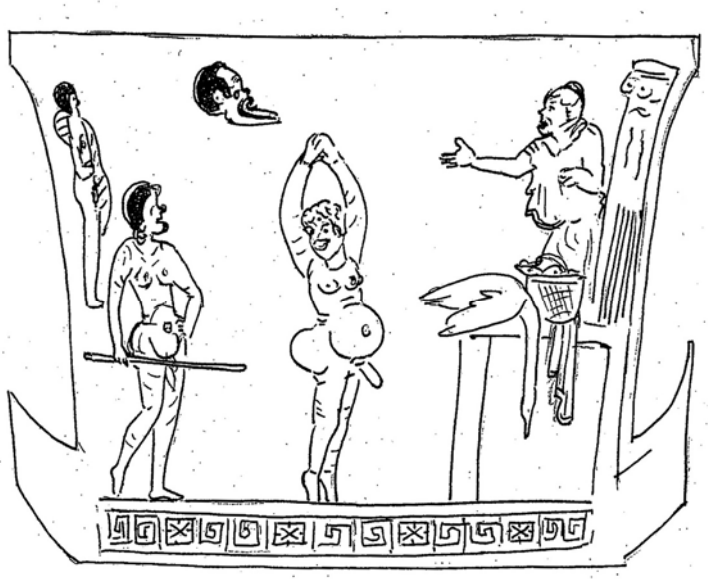
Even though the paintings associated with the goose are very theatrical it seems strange that the male characters are presented naked. There is no evidence of stage-nudity in comedy performance practice. It is interesting to suggest that these naked images could be parodying traditional iconography where the beautiful athletic male body is presented naked while the women are always clothed. This proves that in many instances the 'snapshot' theory mentioned in the beginning of this section might be considered oversimplified. Silk disagrees with those who are too ready to extrapolate from evidence provided by vase paintings because according to him visual art in any age is liable to establish its own generalizing conventions.[35] Keeping this important reservation in mind it is important to consider archaeological evidence that can give us an insight into the appearance of distorted bodies, especially when set in a theatrical context, since it is the only visual information that survives from antiquity that is relevant to performance practice.

When observing fig. 1.15 the head and body seem equally significant. The mask distorts the head and face of the actor in the same manner that the padding distorts the body. The male bodies are almost identical, so the figures as a whole would have seemed similar from a distance. The only differences between these bodies are their posture and colour of hair. The male with the white hair is on tiptoe, with his arms raised as if they were tied, and the male with dark hair has his hand on his hip and holds a rod. The female with an equally distorted face is distinguished from the two male characters by being fully clothed and by the absence of phallus. Apart from the central figure's face it is difficult to see the facial characteristics of the other two images that are in profile. The presence of a disembodied comic mask could be suggestive of a possible doubling of parts during the performance by changing masks.

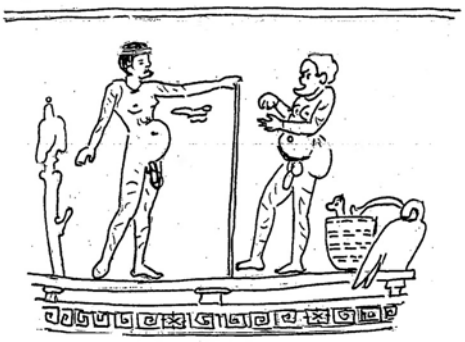
[34] See Taplin, *Comic angels* (n. 6, above) 35.

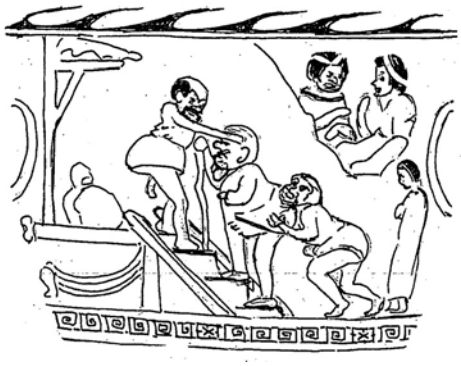
[35] Silk, *Aristophanes and the definition of comedy* (n. 1, above) 8.

1.17 'Choregoi'. Apulian Bell-Krater, Fleischman coll., 400-380BC, New York F93. Drawing by Athena Varakis



1.18 'New York Goose Play'. Apulian Bell-Krater, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 400BC. New York 24.97.104. Drawing by Athena Varakis





1.19 (top) ‘Boston Goose Play’. Apulian Bell-Krater, Museum of Fine Arts, 470 BC., Boston 69.695. Drawing by Athena Varakis

1.20 (centre) ‘Wurzburg Telephos’. Apulian Bell-Krater, Martin von Wagner Museum der Universitat Wurzburg, 370 BC., Wurzburg H 5697. Drawing by Athena Varakis

1.21 (bottom) ‘Cheiron’. Apulian Bell-Krater, British Museum, London F151. Drawing by Athena Varakis

Taking into consideration the above descriptions it seems that the faces on this painting are not essential in distinguishing parts. The same would apply to the Boston Goose painting (see fig.1.7), which seems to be a representation of the same play. Although the faces in profile are clearer on this vase, from a distance the images would probably have seemed very similar since the bodies are almost identical. It seems that the colour of hair marks the age of the character, and the shaven face could have marked the effeminacy and foreign identity of the Scythian policeman. C. W. Marshall has argued that the colour of hair and skin would have been the primary elements in distinguishing characters,[36] but this seems problematic for images as in the 'choregos vase' (fig. 1.17), where both figures on the right appear to have a similar mask. As I have already mentioned most men in Athens shared some common characteristics (for instance beards). In this case Marshall claims that small variations would have been helpful. However details would have been impossible to discern from a distance and costume would have been a better guide. On the 'choregos vase' the slave *PYRRIA* seems to be dressed more richly than the free man is. This could have implied a change of role (like for instance in *Frogs* when the slave has to wear his master's clothes).

The painting seen in fig. 1.20 is clearly relevant to a scene from Aristophanes' play *Women at the Thesmophoria*. On this painting we can see two characters. They are both wearing female costumes and the phallus is absent. According to Taplin the comic scene travesties a familiar serious one and is a moment from *Women at the Thesmophoria*.[37] Thus the character kneeling on the altar is a man dressed as a woman and his rumpled hose revealed under the dress indicates that he is wearing a male costume beneath the *krokotos*. Foley has argued that such images stress the comic costume's self referential quality by reminding the observer that another body exists beneath the masked body. It seems quite difficult to imagine an ancient audience paying attention to such detail, especially when there is no evidence of textual metatheatrical references to costume that would draw attention to the artificiality of the mask. In the Greek theatre, where there is no evidence of changing masks onstage and where there is certainly no evidence of mingling masked with non-masked characters, it would be very difficult to have a double vision of mask and actor. The act of masking is rarely mentioned in the plays because, unlike today, wearing a mask and, in the case of comedy, body mask was a natural way of performing and not a special effect that would draw the audience's attention to the artificiality of the costume.[38]

The comic mask and body in performance

Coming back to the grotesque quality of the Aristophanic stage figures one realizes that whether the Aristophanic hero is an old or young man, slave or free, the open mouth, belly, buttocks, and genitals are equally important and there is no obvious element on the mask that indicates a detailed variation in social status. All figures look similar and one does not pay attention to small differences that may occur between the masks. Even

[36] C. W. Marshall, 'Some fifth-century masking conventions', *Greece and Rome* 46 (1999) 188-202.

[37] See Taplin, *Comic angels* (n. 6, above) 37-40.

[38] Wiles, *The masks of Menander* (n. 7, above).

Webster admits the difficulty of distinguishing certain masks: 'it seems impossible to draw a hard and fast line between slaves and the poorer members of the free population'.[39] On the other hand Dearden considers the similarity of the masks on the terracotta figurines, and suggests that the same mask was worn to represent different characters because the costume was a far better guide to change of character: 'the distance between actors and audience in any case, would make dress a far better guide to change of character than mask.'[40] However in the case of slaves this view might seem problematic since there is no evidence of a particular uniform for slaves in the fifth century that would distinguish them from their masters. It must be assumed that on this instance Athenians must have identified characters on the basis of context.[41]

The large size and outdoor nature of the theatrical space must also be considered when interpreting the impact of the comic mask and body in performance. Most scholarly studies fail to consider this aspect and thus are in danger of reaching conclusions that are inaccurate, especially when discussing details of costume that would have been difficult to discern from a distance. In an experiment funded by the AHRB that took place in July 2000 masked performers were observed from a distance across the Roman Amphitheatre at Cirencester. Based on my personal experience of viewing these masks in an open air space in daylight, it was obvious that the only characteristics that were discernible from a distance were the shape and colour of the mask and colour of hair. All other facial details were indistinct.[42]

One must assume that in Old Comedy the exaggerated parts of the comic body and mask would be evident, and colour of face and hair would be able to signify gender and age, but any other details would surely be ineffective in communicating a prescribed meaning.[43] In Aristophanes' theatre the bodies and heads would have merged from a distance as there is no neck to isolate the two. The shape of the theatrical figure emphasizes the head with wide mouth, the belly, buttocks, and phallus. These elements are the most important features in defining character in Aristophanes' world. The physical movement of the performer would also be crucial in communicating certain excessive behaviours and transformations and must have been affected by the material presence of

[39] T. B. L. Webster, *Greek theatre production* (London 1970) 63.

[40] C. W. Dearden, *The stage of Aristophanes* (London 1967) 125.

[41] For more on this issue see David Wiles, 'Greek theatre and the legitimation of slavery', in Leonie Archer (ed.), *Slavery and other forms of unfree labour* (London 1988).

[42] The 'Taking Greek masks in outdoor spaces: visual, acoustical and experiential aspects' project funded by the AHRB that took place in July 2000. In this project the aim was to explore an alternative approach to the understanding of the Greek mask. The outcomes of this project have been published in Chris Vervain and David Wiles, 'The masks of Greek tragedy as point of departure for modern performance', *NTQ* 67 (2001) 254-72.

[43] Athenian women's faces were pale because they spent most of their time indoors while healthy men were darker (sunburnt) because they spent most of their time in an outdoor environment without having to cover their face. This was reflected in the colour of the mask. Laura Stone gives a number of examples from the Aristophanic texts, which refer to the colour of the skin. See *Costume in Aristophanic comedy* (n. 24, above) 22-23.

the body mask. As modern mask practitioner Lecoq observes when discussing the relationship between mask and the actor's body:

> …we can allow ourselves to be guided by the form itself, as it is shaped by the structure of the mask. The mask then becomes a sort of vehicle, drawing the whole body into an expressive use of space, determining the particular movements which make the character appear.[44]

Theatre practitioner Stanislavsky has also stressed the importance of the body's shape and size in determining a person's physical behaviour in his description of a fat person's movement:

> What is a fat man? How does his behaviour differ from that of a thin man? The body of a stout man always leans slightly backward, his feet spread apart. Why does this happen? The centre of gravity of a stout man is shifted to the stomach, and this makes him lean backward to maintain his balance. His plump, fat thighs do not permit his legs to move as they do in a normal person. The change in his walk comes from this.[45]

Although his description refers to a real body and not an artificially padded body it still indicates how certain bodily features encourage a distinctive kind of physical behaviour. Similar bodies could, thus, produce similar patterns of movement.

Thus, in an ancient performance context, the physical movement of the performer, the nature of the theatrical space, natural lighting, spoken words of the text, overall dramatic context but also wider festive environment of drinking and participating in various processions prior to the theatrical performance would have been essential in affecting the ancient spectators' creative gaze. In Aristophanic performance the presence of a de-individualized mask that levelled all wearers within the democratic and playful world of Old Comedy would allow the audience to project onto the same mask innumerable expressions and faces following the frequent transformations suggested in the text. In this case, the re-creative power would not only be identifiable in the dramatic quality of the characters, as suggested by Silk, or the grotesque aesthetics of the theatrical bodies but would lie in the act of viewing as well, turning the ancient spectators into active participants of the performance within the playful atmosphere of a religious festival. As Wiles has convincingly argued when investigating the power of the Greek mask, in his attempt to bridge the divide created by modern scholarship between its aesthetic and religious function, the mask was much more than an aesthetic object that complemented the text. It could also be understood as a sacred object which transformed the wearer and exerted power over an audience.[46]

Ian Ruffel in a recent article that explores audience and emotion rightly asks us to reconsider the generic distinction made by modern scholarship between tragedy and comedy based on the premise that the first is high, universal, and abstract whilst the second is low, particular, and concrete, by drawing our attention to some of the universal

[44] Jacques Lecoq, *The moving body* (London 2000) 56.

[45] Vasily Osipovich Toporkov, *Stanislavsky in rehearsal: the final years* (New York 1979) 205.

[46] *Mask and performance in Greek tragedy* (n. 7, above).

qualities of comedy including bodily phenomena such as excrement and eating but also costume.[47] Without dismissing the highly topical nature of Aristophanic comedy that would have certainly been communicated through the theatrical parody of important individuals and reference to topical situations, I hope through my investigation of body and mask to have shed light on aspects of the comic costume that would have been, similarly to the dramatic characters, malleable in an ancient performance context. The mask and body, just like the characters, were not fixed to echo pre-determined meanings but open to interpretation, allowing the freedom of the ancient audience's imagination to flourish in a 'recreative' way, in line with the participatory nature of the theatrical event.

affiliation

[47] Ian Ruffel, 'Audience and emotion', in Revermann and Wilson (eds.), *Performance, iconography, reception* (n. 4, above) 37-58, at 50-51.